



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Tosca

Rena Berliner

After the death of her Mother Sabina, Tosca stayed with us. She, who saw her Mother's lifeless bloody body lying in the courtyard of the house, still couldn't believe in what had happened.

She kept repeating again and again "maybe it wasn't really Mama. She went someplace or for a few days and will come back soon." Sometimes she would cry and say: "I know why Mama is gone: I was naughty and she was angry with me." Tosca was twelve years old.

We tried our best to console her, but of no avail. She sometimes asked for her father but we did not know where Pinchas had disappeared to and had to tell her that he will come to see her soon.

A few weeks had passed, punctuated with killings of Jews and numerous actions. More people were taken from their homes and murdered. Tosia became quiet and withdrawn. She could sit for hours with my Mother, her aunt, and hold a book in her hands, glancing at it with unseeing eyes. One day, her father, uncle Pinchas, showed up. He was holed up with some woman and heard about Sabina's death. He came to claim his daughter. Tosca was overjoyed to see him and parted from us without hardly a word. She did love us, but her handsome father, no matter what he did, had always been the love of her young life. Poor little Tosia, who inherited nothing of her parents good looks; an ugly, skinny duckling, looking with awe and adoring eyes at her masculine, tall father.

A short time after Tosca left, my younger sister Finia was taken from her place of work and gassed in the ovens of Belzec.

Uncle Benjamin, in whose apartment we then lived, my cousins Leo, Lula and many members of our family were gone too, as were thousands of Jews from Lwow.

We were numb with pain, grief and disbelief. We didn't know then that the people taken in this "August Action" were all gassed and we thought that they were taken to concentration camps to work.

In the beginning of October, we were moved into a closed Ghetto in the outskirts of the city.

We heard that Tosca and Pinchas had moved in with his sister. We were so engrossed in our own sorrow, misery and

fear of what the next hour will bring, that we had temporarily forgotten about Tosca.

Our new home in the Ghetto was a long room we shared with two more families. Few of our jewelry and Sabina's little pouch she entrusted to my mother for safekeeping before she was killed, were hidden in the hollow posts of my parents brass bed which we managed to salvage from our own apartment.

We were sure that no one knew about it; but one day when we all came back from work, our roommate, Mr. Huss, who called in sick that day, informed us that the Jewish Ghetto Police was in the room and has taken our jewelry. It was of course Mr. Huss, who somehow found out about the hiding place and robbed us. For days the Huss family had suddenly eaten well.

Luckily, Mother's four-carat diamond and several gold pieces remained hidden in the hollowed heels of the shoes we wore.

Whoever the Germans did not kill or taken in the numerous "actions" was either dying of hunger or typhus which raged in the Ghetto.

Uncle Pinchas, the handsome fearless rake, died in a terrible delirium of meningitis he contracted as a complication of his typhus.

Tosia was left with his sister and no matter how many times we asked her to come and live with us, she refused being totally influenced by her paternal aunt who cared for her.

Since Tosia was only thirteen then, she didn't work and hid in a special hiding place during the "actions."

We saw her from time to time; she was dirty, emaciated and very sad. We gave her some food from our own meager rations and some clothing, but Tosia was afraid of her aunt and would not stay with us too long.

Mother contracted typhus and lingered for days on the edge of death. There were no medicines in the Ghetto and only very few doctors to tend the numerous sick. Miraculously, Mama survived!

On the first day of her convalescence, we heard of an "action" at the gates of the Ghetto. I dressed Mother in my coat which had a hood attached to it and painted her deadly pale face with rouge and lipstick.

At that time we all worked for the Wehrmacht outside the Ghetto in a clothing factory.

We passed the gates of the Ghetto, but Father was pulled out of line. Thousands of Jews were taken on that day and

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Whoever the Germans did not kill or taken in the name of the Ghetto Police, they were taken to the Ghetto which lay in the center of the city. The handsome fearless rake, died in a terrible complication of his typhus.

To his left with his sister and no matter how many being totally influenced by her paternal aunt who cared for her.

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shot on the sands of Janowska Concentration Camp. Father was one of them. My father was gone. Father whom I was never close to, and with whom I seldom talked and shared my young life. He was a good man and he loved my sister and me, but for some reason could not communicate with us, children. He adored his wife and both had a close and very loving relationship.

Mother and I did not cry. We were prepared to die at any moment. Our only solace was the knowledge that we both carried "ciankali," a fast acting poison, which we bought a day after Father was gone. We promised ourselves never to be taken by the Germans alive. At the same time that we bought the poison, Father's friend, Mr. Kurtz sold Mama's diamond ring and with part of money obtained for us "false" Arian documents.

Mother and I decided to flee at the next given opportunity. We had nothing to lose. It was the end of March 1943 and news filtered into the Ghetto that by the end of April Lwow would be "Judenfrei" (free of Jews).

We did not hear of Tosia in a while, when one day, about a week before we were planning to escape, Pinchas' sister came to us with the news that Tosia was caught in the street and imprisoned in a jail in the Ghetto.

People were collected and kept there between "actions" to be later included into shipments to the Belzec Concentration Camp. (By then we knew about the gassings.)

We were terribly upset. Mother still weak from her illness cried for a few days when I finally decided to ask Mr. Kurtz for help. He suggested that if we could be able to produce a large sum of money he may be able to get Tosia out of jail. We had the money but to spend it meant not to be able to escape from the Ghetto and surely die. We needed it for a chance to survive.

After sleepless nights I, a seventeen-year-old child, decided for both of us to flee. Tosia was left in jail and, I am sure, later gassed in Belzec.

Almost forty years have passed, but I still think about what I have done. I think about it often with great sorrow and sadness and guilt, yes, guilt for having been forced to make such a terrible decision.

How strong is ones self-preservation instinct and what horrible choices we had to make to live, in these catastrophic times.

